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ABSTRACT

Community is a state of being together in which people lower their defenses and learn to accept and rejoice in differences among people. The characteristics of true community are true inclusivity; no one is exclusive or excluded. People are social creatures who desperately need each other not only for company but for meaning in their lives. Counselors are the "human concern providers" to their communities. (ABL)

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Building Community for the 21st Century

Joan T. England

Introduction

The theme for the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision 2nd National Conference in San Antonio (1992) is "Pluralism: Building Community for the 21st Century." A society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditions and special interests while cooperatively working toward the interdependence needed for a nation's unity is an excellent definition of pluralism. But what of community building? What is it?

Community

Community is a state of being together in which people lower their defenses, and learn to accept and rejoice in differences among people. The transcendence of rugged individualism to soft individualism is the basis of community. As M. Scott Peck (1987) said "Community is a true alchemical process that transforms the dross of our differences into golden harmony" (p. 171). We can no longer define equality as sameness but must value differences whether we are talking about race, gender, ethnicity, life style, or professional discipline.

How does one build community? Perhaps the best example could be through a version of "The Rabbi's Gift" from Peck (1987): The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. As a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries and the rise of secularism in the 19th, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house, the abbot and four others, all over 70 in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. It occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice that would help save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered on this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go to the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they came back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm. (From the prologue of *A Different Drum* by Scott Peck, 1987.)

The Individual and Community

Much in the same way that the rabbi helped the abbot, we too are called to power. In the process of individuation we must take responsibility for ourselves and develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination toward a global community. This wholeness must be recognized in the context of others. We are social creatures who desperately need each other not only for company but for meaning in our lives. Swami Venkatesananda (1985) said, "Any persons whom you have ever met, even if you have just exchanged a glance on a bus, have become part of your being, and consequently you are in some sense ultimately responsible for them. You carry them in your heart" (p. 139).

Scott Peck, in his book *The Different Drum* (1987) claims that the move into true community frees those who must lead from leadership positions, for, he states that compulsive leaders feel free in

community not to lead. True community becomes the ideal decision-making body, but control and traditional hierarchical patterns must be set aside.

Stages of Community Building

To work toward peace and community we must recall that building community takes time; it is not an instant process but one which requires the recognition and celebration of individual differences. Peck (1987) describes the transcendence of culture and community building as a process of stages involving individuals and groups of people. Christensen (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992) parallels this with a paradigm of Stages of Cross-cultural awareness. For individuals in Peck's (1987) **Stage 1** people are pretenders; they pretend they are loving and pious, covering up their lack of principles. The first primitive stage of community is characterized by pretense. The group looks like a community without doing any of the work involved. Christensen's Stage 1 includes people who are unaware, who have never thought about cultural, ethnic, or racial differences or meaning and influence for individuals and groups.

Peck's (1987) **Stage 2** people have begun submitting themselves to principle—the law. Consequently they are legalistic, parochial and dogmatic. They are threatened by anyone who thinks differently from them and attempt to fix one another as opposed to ***accepting*** one another. Christensen's (1989) Stage 2 people are beginning to become aware, developing a sense of uneasiness and cognitive dissonance.

Peck's (1987) **Stage 3** is a stage of questioning and is analogous to the crucial stage of emptiness in community formation. In reaching for community the group must question themselves. They may ask, "I wonder to what extent my feelings about homosexuals represent a prejudice bearing little relation to reality?" Such questioning is the required beginning of an emptying process. We cannot succeed in emptying ourselves of preconceptions, prejudices, needs to control or convert and so forth without first becoming skeptical of them and without doubting their necessity. Individuals become stuck in stage 3 precisely because they do not doubt deeply enough. Christensen's (1989) Stage 3 involves a conscious awareness where there is evidence of conflicting preoccupation with cultural, ethnic, and racial differences and meanings, present and past. (The stereotypes don't fit anymore.)

To enter Peck's **Stage 4** they must begin to empty themselves of the dogmas of skepticism such as, "Anything that can't be measured scientifically can't be known and isn't worth studying." They must begin to even doubt their own doubt. Christensen's (1989) Stage 4 is consolidated awareness where there is commitment to seek positive societal change and promote understanding. (Reconciliation). In both Peck's and Christensen's models, the key to transition and change is between the third and fourth stages; the changes begin and can be aborted or continue to fruition.

The characteristics of true community are true inclusivity, no one is exclusive or excluded. There must be commitment; the group must commit themselves to one another to become community. A second characteristic is realism; from the divergent views of the members of a community, a realistic and viable response can be found versus the single view of one. Community is a safe place to be vulnerable and therefore leads to change, for you are accepted as you are.

Communication

When you do what you can do you may begin through language and communication. Communication and community, like charity, begins at home. The overall purpose of human communication is (or should be) reconciliation. It should ultimately serve to lower or remove walls and barriers of misunderstanding that unduly separate us human beings from one another. The rules for community making are the rules for effective communication (Peck, 1987). Communication is the bedrock of all human relationships, the principles of community have profound application to any situation in which two people are gathered together—in the global community, in the home, business or neighborhood. The Sufis advise us to speak only after our words have managed to pass through three gates. At the first gate we ask ourselves, "Are these words true?" If so, we let them pass on; if not, back they go. At the second gate we ask, "Are they necessary?" At the last gate we ask, "Are they kind?" (Easwaran in *Peacemaking*, 1985, p. 59). If we were to adopt the Sufis' strategy would we move closer to community and global peace? As this vision of peace becomes possible, as necessary for human survival, we express this vision in a language of peace. Language, in turn, shapes our way of seeing things. The power of our own words can foster peace and community.

Conclusion

Counselors, are the "human concern providers" to our communities. The pinnacle of our being lies in our membership in communities. Taking a stance from the peace and justice movements currently active in our country may be necessary. Susan Wilson (1992) says that working toward unity and peace is not a task for the weak or fainthearted. She visualizes for us the words which may spur us forward; we need to build bridges to span barriers, release bonds and practice bravery. We may "rise above" the turbulence, the chasms of our fears and build a diverse house with many levels on the "other side"—the 21st century.

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